

FIRST ISSUE OF THE NEW BI-MONTHLY

DISSENT

CEASE FIRE!

We propose that the U.S. government declare in favor of an immediate cease-fire. Nothing less will do if the mounting slaughter is to be stopped, nothing less than a forthright declaration to the world that as of a certain date the U.S. proposes that the shooting stop and, as a token of good-will, it immediately ceases the bombing of North Vietnam. One way this could, or could have, occurred

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a first hand report
by Marshall Sahlins

THE DESTRUCTION OF CONSCIENCE IN VIETNAM

PROTEST

Opinions and Proposals on Strategies of Opposition:
Kenneth Boulding, Michael Walzer, Tom Kahn, others

POLITICS

Emanuel Geltman and Stanley Plostrik on
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JANUARY-FEBRUARY 1966

75c.

Tom Kahn

5. Direct Action and Democratic Values

The following article is adapted from a speech delivered at a conference of "Turn Toward Peace."

I will be talking about direct action as a nonparliamentary, nonelectoral form of struggle for social change—that is, as a political act. I mean deliberately to exclude, at the outset, the purely conscientious form of direct action—that is, acts of protest conducted by individuals as a matter of private conscience or morality, regardless of their political impact. About this form of direct action, there is much to respect but little to say. If an individual refuses as a matter of conscience (be it religious or political conscience) to serve in the armed forces or to pay his income tax, that is one thing. If he urges these policies on others, advocating them as a strategy for social change, then he has stepped into the political realm, and consequently he

invites political judgments.

If we accept the definition of direct action as nonparliamentary, nonelectoral forms of struggle for social change, then it is clear that practically nobody of consequence opposes direct action. The unions engage in it through strikes and picket lines. Rent strikes have—more or less—been legalized in New York State. The Supreme Court has upheld the constitutional right of citizens to sit-in, and even President Johnson has acknowledged that it took street demonstrations to get civil rights legislation through Congress.

To be sure, there are other forms of direct action or social dislocation which are not officially sanctioned. My point is that among intelligent people the issue is not: for or against

direct action *per se*. Rather, the issue is: what kind of direct action, at what time, and for what purpose.

As a democratic socialist, I do not necessarily confine myself to those forms of direct action which have been *legalized* by the society. But I do feel the obligation to determine what forms of direct action are *legitimate* in terms of democratic theory. Often, though not always, this question will bear on the tactical efficacy of direct action.

This is a complex subject, about which it is difficult to formulate hard-and-fast rules. In concrete struggles there are always exceptional situations, unprecedented circumstances. If the following observations seem tendentious or dogmatic, they are intended as notes, not as last words. Hopefully, they will provoke counterarguments as well as refinements.

I

In the radical movement, direct action (mass action, social dislocation) has been developed in two forms. First, as a *substitute for parliamentary action*. The only embodiment of this form in the United States was the IWW. In general, this approach has been confined to the Syndicalist movement, reaching its peak in the myth of the general strike: halt production, and power will fall from the bourgeoisie into your own hands. (One difficulty here was that the anarchists themselves were unwilling to accept that power).

Hand-in-hand with this view of direct action goes what I would call "The Theory of Permanent Demonstration." That is, it becomes neces-

sary to have demonstration after demonstration, to keep the masses perpetually in motion in the streets. For there is no other way to keep alive what is deemed to be the only legitimate form of power. The problem, of course, is that the masses, like everyone else, tire of the streets; they cannot be kept constantly in turmoil—especially if the demonstrations fail to produce concrete gains. In actuality, "direct action" for the IWW turned out to be mainly a series of general strikes, mostly in small Western towns. They chained themselves to lamp-posts, filled the jails, and were masters at social dislocation. But in the overwhelming majority of these efforts there were no sequels, and no permanent or durable organization was left behind.

Among virtually all other sections of the radical movement, this conception of direct action was rejected in favor of another: namely, that direct action was a *supplement to parliamentary action*. In fact, when direct action was most successful, its purpose was to achieve parliamentary—that is, legislative—successes. More specifically, direct action as a mass movement—not merely as scattered protest—was most impressive and successful in the struggle for universal suffrage.

It is interesting to note that right-wing and left-wing socialists alike rejected the anarchist concept of direct action. They saw it, instead, as a weapon to which the masses were compelled to resort because they were otherwise cut off from democratic expression. In Germany, for example, Rosa Luxemburg called for mass action precisely because the workers

were denied equal suffrage. Only through mass action could that right be extracted from the ruling classes. Here, too, it should be noted that the advocacy of mass action by left-wing socialists was directed at large-scale workers movements or social democratic parties. It was not undertaken as a substitute for, or in the absence of, a major political movement. Rather, it was part of a strategy to move social forces in certain directions, to secure massive support. This was a criterion by which direct action was to be judged.

Here I am reminded of Leon Trotsky's remark about the tactics of the German Communists in the immediate pre-Hitler period—namely, that they "succeeded only in irritating all classes instead of winning any." They irritated the bourgeoisie by continued sniping, not followed up by energetic moves toward power. They irritated the confused middle-classes because, while the Communists could not or would not themselves rule, they wouldn't let anyone else. Finally, they wore out the patience of the workers through continual demonstrations and street fighting. Inevitably, there comes along a force calling for the restoration of order—and all classes unite (actively or passively) in putting down the disorderly.

I have referred often to the radical and socialist movements of the past because the "new left" today, after all, regards itself not as liberal but as radical and at least socialistic. The historical experience, as I understand it, can be summarized in this way: with regard to revolutionary overthrow, socialists believed that in

a tyrannical regime, direct action or social dislocation was the only course. Even in a parliamentary regime, they considered it necessary in the struggle for legislative success. But it was not made a fetish. It was not viewed as suitable for everything by everybody at every time. Each contemplated action was to be judged on its own practical, strategic merit. What is the goal to be achieved? Will the given action bring us closer to that goal or divert us from it? Whom will it alienate, whom will it win over? Are we engaging in an act which endangers not only our individual safety, but the prospects of the movement?

II

Several analogies suggest themselves with regard to the civil rights movement in this country. First of all, it is clear that the direct action phase of the movement, launched in the South, began at a time when official national policy had shifted from acquiescence in segregation to the view that it was wrong in principle. (There is not space to describe the nature of the struggle that went into causing the shift, except to say that it was not primarily based on direct action). Opposition to segregation may have been passive, enforcement of integration certainly was. Nonetheless, if at the time of the 1960 sit-ins, the majority of Southerners were still segregationists, the majority of the country was not.

Now it can be argued that the sit-ins would have been morally defensible and deserving of support no matter when they had occurred—if, say, they had occurred twenty years

earlier. Abstractly speaking, of course, any protest against injustice is always morally supportable. On the other hand, it is quite possible that, had the sit-ins been launched earlier, they might have provoked the reactionary forces into brutal suppression, without arousing significant support. (Indeed, this was the fate of earlier direct action attempts.) As it turned out, the sit-ins helped to create a massive civil rights movement and to split the white power structure.

As it also turns out, most of the demands raised by the sit-in movement—mainly in the field of public accommodation—have been legislated into law. But in almost any area of life, direct action in the South has had a legitimacy precisely because of the absence of universal suffrage—that is, the disfranchisement of the Negro population. This fact alone, where it obtains, negates the claim to political democracy and bars the redress of grievances through representative political structures. Even though the electorate may constitute a majority of the total population, denial of equal rights to the minority is inherently undemocratic and therefore invalidates the minority's obligation not to obstruct the implementation of the majority's policies. This, it seems to me, is the justification for those forms of direct action which are coercive, though non-violent, in effect (e.g., sitting-in at a lunch counter, which imposes on the owner the choice of integrating or closing down, foreclosing his preference for the status quo).

I am not arguing that direct action has no place in a society where the right to vote is guaranteed. I am arguing for a correct understanding of

the relationships of direct action to political power. Bayard Rustin has often stated that direct action may call attention to an injustice but only in certain instances can simultaneously eliminate it. If direct action calls attention to the injustice, it is symbolic; if it simultaneously eliminates the injustice, it is likely to be coercive or obstructive. The distinction depends not on the form of the direct action but on its function in a given situation. (For example, the sit-in a few years ago on the Triboro Bridge was obstructive of traffic but not of the New York segregation it was meant to protest. It was therefore symbolic—and not very symbolic since it was so far removed from the injustice.) The prominence achieved by coercive direct action, because of its dramatic successes in the South, may have obscured Rustin's point that it is applicable only in limited situations. Symbolic direct action has wider possibilities in support of social change. *But real change occurs when the dominant social organism acknowledges the demanded right and incorporates it into some effective legal instrument.*

A brilliant illustration of this process—and a monumentally successful direct action—was the Selma march. The moral effect of the march was enormous, but the real change occurred at the point when Congress passed the Voting Rights Act. The change will continue as the Act is tested in the enforcement. Again, the point is that direct action is effective to the extent that it secures a general political recognition, the latter being embodied or nailed down in society by legal in-

struments with superior power behind them.

From this it follows that politically successful direct action is not simply a form of self-expression but must be aimed at arousing and winning specific support from specific groups. For without a substantial political movement behind it, it cannot hope to effect change at the point where it must occur in public policy.

III

It must simply be presumed that the goal of direct action is to change public policy. Individuals participating in that action may derive important existential benefits: meaning may be added to their lives and outlets for creative impulses may open. These benefits cannot be dismissed; they are central to the radical philosophical tradition which values engagement and struggle.

But the existential or personal meaning presupposes the objective reality of the struggle. Unlike great theater, arenas of struggle cannot be reproduced at will to provide a framework of emotional involvement. The reality of social conflict is a matter of tangible victories and defeats, of ground won and lost, of institutional changes which become the starting point of the succeeding generation. The sense of individual purpose comes from engagement with others in the external challenge to maximize the potentialities for human change within our given time.

It is a common external goal, whatever inner meanings this goal may have for the individual, that brings people together into a movement and

defines their responsibilities to each other. If I join a group in a lunch counter sit-in, I may experience a religious exaltation, the next man may be paralyzed with fear, the next may be seething with violence. In another context, I might be interested in encouraging the fullest airing of all these feelings. But at that point, our common concern is to integrate the lunch counter, and each of us relies heavily on that assumption—on that common external goal. That is the mandate, the responsibility, each of us accepts. We may take on others, voluntarily—but then we enter into different relationships, to which we ought not be involuntarily committed in advance.

Perhaps the point is belabored, but not irrelevantly. There is a tendency among some “movement” people to defend forms of direct action that clearly misfire or damage the cause on the grounds that these nonetheless serve a higher morality, that of spontaneous human expression. Whether such expression does represent a higher morality than the cause is an interesting question. But support for the cause is the basis of the *human* movement and the associations it fosters. While ultimate problems of morality are being pondered, one is obliged to act morally, that is with a sense of responsibility, toward the movement itself. Questions of morality and democratic ethics become closely intertwined. Does one, for example, have the “right” to engage in an act which evokes hostility to the civil rights movement—or which discredits the peace movement? In the process of self-expression, to what extent do we take the destinies of others into our own hands?

IV

Direct action of the self-expressive kind aims for visibility, not power. This is not to stay that it solves the problem of power; on the contrary, it does not confront it. It opposes power, but does not grapple with it. Opposition, therefore, becomes individual. An example of this process is the current anti-draft campaign, the proponents of which admittedly do not expect to build a movement that can change American policies in Vietnam. Even the most sympathetic observers must recognize that because of the necessarily limited scope of the campaign, the most militant forms of direct action (e.g., draft-card burnings) can raise demands no more radical than that draftees be permitted alternate service in Vista, the Peace Corps, etc. The latter are hardly major areas of social conflict where issues of power are involved.

That, objectively, no other options were open to youth who opposed the war may or may not be true. It is in any case irrelevant to the main point, which is not what strategy the student movement should pursue with regard to the war, but the relationship between direct action and democratic social change. The opportunities for the desired relationship may not always be present; it is still important to know what relationship is desired.

It is important, and pertinent to democracy, to evaluate whether given forms of direct action lead to the building or strengthening of institutions which are capable of representing and struggling for the interests of aggrieved classes—not just in dramatic spasms but with unrelenting tenacity.

Such institutions—one thinks immedi-

ately, though not exclusively, of the labor movement—fill the void between the individual and the state, between protest and mechanical politics. These are the mass organizations which a totalitarian state invariably destroys or takes over in its consolidation of power. In criticizing these institutions for their bureaucratic deformities and lack of militancy, we can easily forget that their very existence, independently of the state, is crucial to democracy. And it is the relationship between these institutions and the state at any given time that defines the potential for change—reformist or revolutionary, peaceful or violent, democratic or elitist.

V

Direct action which is not related to a strategy for building a mass movement has within it a tendency toward elitism. Direct action which alienates potential allies, which aims to differentiate itself rather than to attract others, soon succeeds in isolating itself. It is then prone to accept the notion that given the relative passivity or indifference or cowardice of the liberal or reform movements, it must act in place of them.

Something of this notion has already appeared on the scene. It was represented, I think, by the Assembly of Unrepresented People, and by the recent slogans on behalf of "parallel government" and "counter-institutions." I understand it has been suggested that a counter-government be established to negotiate peace with the Vietcong. Others, not waiting for such a government to be born, have already declared peace.

Staughton Lynd, in his *Liberation*

article ("Nonviolent Revolution or Coalition Politics," June-July issue) helped crystallize the subtle putschism that characterizes this mood (fortunately, it is not yet an ideology.) Musing over the April 17th March on Washington, Lynd suggests that the next time the marchers should take over "their government," if "only for a few minutes." As Bayard Rustin properly replied (*Partisan Review*, Fall 1965): "Under whose mandate are the 20,000 Washington marchers entitled to occupy 'their government' for even ten minutes? Does Lynd believe that they represented the views of anything approaching a majority of the American people on the question of Vietnam? On the contrary, the public opinion polls all revealed substantial majorities in support of Administration policies. What gives the disaffected sons and daughters of the middle class the right even symbolically to become the government?"

I doubt that Straughton Lynd or his followers constitute a clear and present danger to the U.S. government, but his ideas may count for something in the "new left," particularly among the counter-institutionalists. They surely have implications for the relationship of direct action to democracy, and not merely bourgeois formalist democracy, either. Granted that in a revolutionary situation, it may be difficult to take a head-count to see whether you have majority support for a seizure of power; nonetheless, democrats in such a situation would be concerned with whether they had the visible support of majoritarian institutions and organized groups in the society. They would have a healthy respect for the democratic mass movements of people,

even when they felt those movements were short-sighted, or vacillating, or bureaucratized.

Even to discuss these matters is embarrassing, because they are so irrelevant to the struggles around us. But if revolutionary symbolism is to be the aura of direct action, then at least the democratic vision should be kept clear. Otherwise, what happens if power is hitched to the symbols?

Another question in the same vein was raised by the Berkeley students who blocked trains carrying troops. Certainly no one can question anybody's right to demonstrate at train stations or to protest troop movements. Rallies, banners, speakers—all are legitimate. What is questionable is the right of a minority physically to prevent the implementation of national policy.

The fact is that it is a matter of national policy to prosecute the war in Vietnam. The public opinion polls—and I grant they are faulty—indicate a large majority support for months. One may oppose that policy and the majority supporting it. One may—and I think must—work in many ways (including direct action) to change that policy and to win over a majority of the people. But what one may not do is, in effect, declare his views to be the majority view, and begin to implement his own policies.

There is an exception to this principle. If democracy means majority rule, it also means that the majority is under an obligation to protect the rights of the minority. If, in carrying out its decisions, democratically arrived at, the majority tramples on my *equal* rights, I am justified in obstructing those decisions. The right of

Southern Negroes to obstruct the functioning of public accommodations and other institutions is clear because the effect of the majority segregationist policy was to deny them rights which everyone else had.

It does not seem to me that the Berkeley students could draw on the sit-ins for justification. Their right to protest against American policy has not been trampled upon (though exercising it may be unpopular). The decision to pursue the war has been made by a democratically-elected government and endorsed by a democratically-elected Congress. That decision, though it may be politically wrong and offensive, does not deny equal rights.* Under such circumstances, how can a minority, in effect, impose its will on the majority?

Perhaps the point becomes clearer if the historical setting is changed. Let us assume that the man in the White House is Franklin D. Roosevelt and, with the approval of Congress, he has decided to send troops and supplies to support the Loyalists in the Spanish Civil War. Right wing groups lie down in front of the troop trains. . . . Or, the U.S. decides to sell large quantities of wheat to the Soviet Union, and dockworkers refuse to load the ships. . . .

The counter arguments are well

* This must be qualified: the draft does discriminate against working class and poor youths who, lacking money for college, cannot get student deferments. I know of no efforts to organize such youths to campaign for abolition of the 2-S status. The precedent might be the campaign of Negroes to integrate the armed forces. Even Negro pacifists participated on the grounds that so long as armies existed, they should be run without discrimination.

known and not without weight: the decision to pursue the war in Vietnam was not democratically arrived at; the power structure controls the mass media; facts about the war have been concealed, public opinion has been manipulated; the democratic elections are therefore shams; etc.

To deny all of this is to deny that we live in a class society wherein wealth and power are concentrated, and political democracy is qualified by economic oligarchy. On the other hand, to deny my arguments is to deny that there is a difference between bourgeois democracy and totalitarianism. (Indeed, the difference often is denied by some spokesman of the "new left.")

It is also to deny, despite all of the perversions of political democracy one may cite, that there has been more public debate about, and vocal opposition to, the Vietnam War than to any war in a century. The minority has demonstrated in cities throughout the country, has confronted Administration spokesmen in scores of teach-ins at major universities, has received widespread publicity (much of it distorted, but much of it not) in the mass media, has organized two mass marches on Washington—in short, has openly and vigorously opposed official national policy to a degree inconceivable in a totalitarian society. The democratic freedoms which some are prone to dismiss so lightly as "formalistic" have been precisely the indispensable prerequisites for minority protest.

The need to put content into formal freedoms, as the "participatory democrats" recently (and democratic socialists all along) have urged, is no less

urgent. But "participatory democracy"—with its striving toward consensus and lowest-common-denominator politics, and with its tendency to mute opposition and channel hostilities—is no substitute for the formal guarantees of the right to vote, to dissent, to organize an opposition, to seek leader-

ship and to denounce leaders (which assumes you can identify them). We do not expand and deepen these rights by refusing to recognize them when they exist—or by devaluating them when, because they are breached and undermined by their fair-weather friends, we are compelled to take to the streets.